

Contra coverage — paid for by the CIA

The Company goes to work in Central America

J by MARTHA HONEY

In 1977, after a Senate Select Committee on Intelligence report disclosed that the Central Intelligence Agency had maintained working relationships with fifty American reporters over a period of years, the agency announced new rules that barred it from entering into "any paid or contractual relationship" with U.S. journalists, including free-lancers and stringers. The regulations say nothing about entering into such relationships with foreign journalists, or about allowing agency operatives to pose as foreign journalists. In Central America, it appears that the agency is doing both.

Carlos Morales, a Costa Rican professor of journalism, editor of the University of Costa Rica's liberal weekly *La Universidad*, and former president of the Costa Rican journalists' union, says that at least eight Costa Rican journalists, including three "top editors," receive monthly payments from the CIA, either directly or through contra groups with offices in Costa Rica. "There may be more, but these I know for certain because most are former students of mine, and some have talked with me about it," Morales says. "Their job is to get into

the press stories, commentaries, or editorials attacking Nicaragua and sympathetic to the contras."

Morales says he began investigating press payoffs after a former student confessed to him that he was taking money from the CIA to supplement a meager salary. The eight journalists are each paid 30,000 colones (about \$500) a month, Morales says. The monthly salary of most journalists in Costa Rica is about 20,000 colones. The Costa Rican press has become increasingly hostile toward Nicaragua over the last few years, and Morales believes that stories planted by CIA-paid journalists have contributed to this trend.

One of the contra groups that paid bribes to reporters in the past, according to one of its former top officials, was ARDE, the Costa Rica-based contra coalition that was headed by Eden Pastora. The official, who asked that his name not be printed, says that ARDE's press secretary kept a list of "about half a dozen names of local journalists" with amounts of money listed alongside the names. "I don't know how frequently these people were paid, but my understanding was that they received payments regularly," the former official says. He adds that since ARDE was financed by the CIA, "this money must also have come from the CIA." Pastora himself has conceded that ARDE received money from the CIA.

A fund for bribing journalists was also maintained by the largest contra group, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), according to Edgar Chamorro, who was one of the group's seven directors and its press spokesman from 1981 until 1984. Chamorro now opposes the contras as well as the Sandinistas. In an affidavit submitted to the World Court in September 1985, Chamorro said he had been the paymaster. "I also received money from the CIA to bribe Honduran

journalists and broadcasters to write and speak favorably about the FDN and to attack the government of Nicaragua and call for its overthrow," Chamorro stated. "Approximately fifteen Honduran journalists and broadcasters were on the CIA's payroll, and our influence was thereby extended to every major Honduran newspaper and radio and television station." Chamorro added that CIA agents told him the same tactic was being used in Costa Rica. Moreover, according to his affidavit, the budget for all his press activities — including bribes — was put together with the assistance of a deputy station chief of the CIA and paid out of Washington, in cash.

Paid-off journalists have helped plant fictitious stories. Former ARDE commander Pastora and some of his aides recall that in January 1984, CIA agents told them to distribute a release through their press networks that gave the contras credit for mining Nicaragua's harbors.

Ex-paymaster: *Former contra leader Edgar Chamorro got money from the CIA to bribe Honduran journalists to attack the Sandinistas in print*



Martha Honey is a stringer for The Times and The Sunday Times of London, the BBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Company, and ABC. In 1985, she and her husband, Tony Avirgan, published a book that blamed the CIA for the May 1984 bombing of Eden Pastora's jungle headquarters — a bombing in which Avirgan was injured and three other journalists were killed. Honey and Avirgan are suing several individuals — including contra leader Adolfo Calero and several former CIA officials — who they claim carried out the bombing as part of a plan to set up a contra force in Costa Rica that would be supported by a drug- and arms-smuggling enterprise. The CIA has consistently denied any connection with the Pastora bombing and with drug smuggling.

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Richard Gattner/The Commercial Appeal Memphis

Free lance or mercenary?

Robert Thompson, who went to Central America to fight with the contras, claims to be a reporter.

although the contras had played no role in the operation. Aides say that Pastora resisted the order, but eventually consented after the release was rewritten in language that sounded more like ARDE and less like the CIA. In his affidavit, Chamorro said that his group, too, was told to take credit for the harbor mining. On January 4, 1984, a CIA deputy station chief woke him up at 2 A.M., Chamorro stated, handed him a press release, and told him to read it over a clandestine contra radio station. Although "we played no role in the mining," Chamorro said, he nevertheless read the release. Two months later, he added, after a Soviet ship struck one of the mines, "the same CIA agent instructed us to deny that one of 'our' mines had damaged the ship."

Dery Dyer, editor of *The Tico Times*, a respected English-language weekly in Costa Rica, says she has seen her share of fictitious stories. "Our most dramatic and personal experience with disinformation," she says, came after the May 1984 bombing of a press conference at

Eden Pastora's jungle contra camp, known as La Penca. One of three journalists who died in the bombing was Linda Frazier, who worked for *The Tico Times*, and the newspaper mounted an energetic investigation.

"We saw, and uncovered as untrue, stories that were planted for political purposes in the local press," Dyer says. "For instance, everybody got off track because the first lead put out was that the bomber was an ETA terrorist named Jose Lujua Gorostiola [the ETA is a leftist Basque group]. But when we checked through Associated Press, the so-called suspect had been for months under house arrest in France." Other false leads pointed toward two suspects from Uruguay, toward the Sandinistas, and even toward victim Linda Frazier, Dyer says. "The impact was to delay the investigation by days, if not weeks, so that the trail got cold." More than three years after the bombing, Costa Rican police officials say all they know for certain is that the bomb was planted by a man posing as a Danish journalist.

(CIA spokesman Kathy Pherson would not comment on allegations of bribery. "As an intelligence organization, there is not a lot we can say," she told the *Review*. She added, however, that while internal regulations adopted in 1977 prohibit the agency's people from posing as U.S. journalists, they say nothing about operatives posing as foreign journalists.)

Felipe Vidal Santiago, a Cuban-American also known as "Morgan" and "Max Vargas," has been posing as a foreign journalist. Vidal carries a press card from the *International Herald Tribune*, which he says he got from the newspaper's Chicago office. But the *Tribune* has no office in Chicago, and Vidal is no journalist. He has been working to help organize a southern front for the contras out of Costa Rica, and there is strong evidence that he works for the CIA.

In a series of interviews conducted over many months, Vidal admitted to procuring arms and other military supplies for the contras, to recruiting mercenaries and training guerrillas, to participating in raids into Nicaragua, and to coordinating his efforts with unnamed U.S. officials. Eden Pastora and other

Nicaraguan rebels, as well as foreign mercenaries aiding the contras, say that Vidal is employed by the CIA. Vidal himself says that he has worked with John Hull, an American farmer in northern Costa Rica who has been widely reported to be a CIA liaison to the contras. Vidal says that his press credentials have helped him move into and out of Costa Rica.

Robert Thompson, a former highway patrolman from Florida, has also claimed to be a reporter. In April 1985, he and four other foreigners were arrested by Costa Rican authorities on one of John Hull's farms near the Nicaraguan border. The five were charged with illegal possession of explosives and with "making hostile acts against a neighboring country," Nicaragua. At the time of his arrest, Thompson said he was a correspondent for Scripps Howard newspapers (he was not), and while he was in jail in Costa Rica he told visiting journalists that he had been on Hull's farm only as a reporter and to do research for a book. Thompson and two men arrested with him left the country to avoid trial after Hull made their bail.

Thompson did, in fact, publish an article about his experiences with the FDN in Honduras and Nicaragua, in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. Editor William Thomas says he had refused to supply Thompson with press credentials but did give him a letter saying he would look at whatever Thompson wrote from Costa Rica. He adds that *The Commercial Appeal* has not run any more of Thompson's articles, but that he considers him "a legitimate free-lancer in Costa Rica."

Several mercenaries who knew Thompson in Honduras and Costa Rica say that, like themselves, Thompson came to Central America to work and fight with the contras. They say he brought with him battle gear and his weapon of choice, a shotgun.

Even Sam Hall, an American who was arrested in Nicaragua in December on spy charges after he was found on a restricted military air base, with maps concealed in his socks, carried a press card. A television correspondent who examined it says that, while it identifies Hall as a journalist, it doesn't name any press organization. Whether Hall ever tried to use it is unknown. ■